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TRADITIONS AND LEGACIES AT CROSSROADS: REREADING OF POLITICAL HISTORY OF TAMIL NADU

Subramaniam Chandran*

Introduction

Traditions imply certain pattern of behavior and the way of doing things in the life-world. Traditions are appropriated to reconstruct the past to the present. Political traditions can be seen as an examination of how the past informs the present. Some of the most influential traditions rely on recycling the same set of clichés and lessons from the past over and over again.Traditions can be deterministic and simplistic; at their best, they are dynamic and rich with historical experiences. Traditions are also often the bridge between intellectuals and activists. In the field of political history, lives of political leaders occupy a central place. Their greatness is not necessarily embedded in similarities of ideas or activities in relation to particular set of norms. Differences and contradictions are always seen in prominent spheres. Sometimes, greatness is seen in conformity to tradition or in opposition to tradition. As Thomas Carlyle rightly said, 'the history of the world is but the biography of great men.[1] Their legacies reflect the same manner in which successive generations sustain or modify due to the pressures from public opinion or constitutional limits. Contemporary political history has its own limits in the democratic and multicultural context.

Traditions and Political Ideologies

Political leaders see their ideas put into practice in their own era or left for future generations to materialize. Their visions help the future generations or their visions might be realized with some modifications as the very course of surviving their spirit. Whether they are conservative or liberal, revolutionary or orthodox, democratic or autocratic, successive generations have the tactics of appropriating them for their own end. Few great men do not leave their ideas and visions for distortion or to modify according to changing needs. Their personality was not flexible enough to allow others to raid on them. This trend explains some sort of discontinuity in their legacy. Sometimes, greatness lies in inventing 'isms' or in advocating 'isms.' Ironically, in many situations, this trend is categorized or labeled by others rather than declaration of great men themselves. Moreover, there is always a difference between the accepted meaning of particular 'ism' and the meaning that great men wish to overload.

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This is how the idea of conservatism, liberalism, rationalism or humanism understood in the life and legacy of political leaders of Tamil Nadu especially Rajaji and Periyar.[2]

Liberalism guarantees life, liberty and property. However, it could not stop the disproportionate accumulation of wealth or power at the cost of social justice. It is believed that democracy and socialism assure better life for the developing society in the process of nation building. When traditional system gives rise to domination of certain groups, the reaction in the form of modern values embedded in rationalism and social equality is formed to mobilize the disadvantaged groups. Class is formed in the particular course of economic life, whereas caste is ordained by scriptures. Access to resources in terms of material or knowledge depends upon the innate differences between individuals and their varying abilities and efforts. Someone may be endowed with exceptional intelligence or talent, or may have worked very hard to achieve their wealth and status. Or they rise to high status by exploiting the weak groups.

In this way, social inequality is not the outcome of innate or natural differences between people, but is produced by the society and sanctioned by the scriptures. This sort of social stratification persists over generations. It is closely linked to the family and to the inheritance of social resources from one generation to the next generations. Within the caste system, birth dictates occupational opportunities. The ascribed aspect of social inequality is reinforced by the practice of endogamy. People with the greatest social privileges express the strongest support for systems of stratifications such as caste and race. Those who have experienced the exploitations and humiliations are most likely to challenge it.

Traditionalism linked with rigid sanctions is opposed by rationalism combined with atheism. Rationalism is any form appealing to reason as a source of knowledge of justification. Atheism can be either the rejection of theism or the position that deities do not exist. Some atheists intend to accept secular philosophies such as humanism, rationalism or naturalism.

Rajaji: A Symbol of Tradition

As the paper discusses the contesting ideas between two traditions generated by Rajaji and Periyar in the political history of Tamil Nadu, it is obviously needed to relook the core biography of these two political leaders in brief. Rajaji was a lawyer, freedom-fighter, politician, writer, statesman and leader of the Indian National Congress. He served as the last Governor-General of India. He served as the Premier of Madras Presidency, Governor of West Bengal, Minister for Home Affairs of the Indian Union and Chief Minister of Madras State. In 1930, he led the Vedaranyam Salt Satyagraha in response to the Dandi March and courted imprisonment. He was described by Mahatma Gandhi as the 'keeper of my conscience.' He supported the partition of India during independence. He was the first recipient of India's highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna. He challenged the socialistic ideas of the Congress party and he founded the Swatantra Party. He vehemently opposed the usage of nuclear weapons and was a proponent of world peace and disarmament. He remained a symbol of liberal and traditional thinker of India.

He tried to build a team of liberals embedded in traditional Hindu values against the socialistic oriented state centered congress regime. He even supported the Dravidian parties and leaders to curtain the monopoly of the Congress.3 He was a man of tradition with liberal values till his death in 1972.

Periyar: Fortune of Legacies

Periyar was a rationalist and social reformer. He founded self-respect movement and Dravidar Kazhagam. At young age, he witnessed incidents of racial, caste and gender discrimination. His political career began with the Indian National Congress. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, he led a non-violent agitation in Vaikom in 1924. He resigned from the Congress due to the perception that the party was serving the interests of the

Brahmins. He toured Malaysia, Europe and Russia. He led the Justice Party in 1939. He accommodated the party in his Dravidar Kazhagam in 1944. He stood for an independent nation for the Tamils or Dravidians. He witnessed the leaving of his close associates of young leaders under C.N. Annadurai who founded the DMK in 1949. Periyar supported Kamaraj solely on the grounds of non-Brahmin leadership in the Congress.4 He propagated his rationalistic social reforms and humanism till his death in 1973.

Legacies at Crossroads

Terms of their legacies obviously do not have any kinship or family ties. What they left for successive generations of people of Tamil Nadu is certain ideas, values and practices. A rereading of political history of Tamil Nadu is essential not only to relook for inspiration in the lives of great men but also to examine the legitimacy and relevance to contemporary context of political realities.[5]

Rajaji is seen as rigid personality and does not offer any place to manipulate or distort for the personal ends of politicians. Rajaji's moral stand remains an idea or ideal, not seen in practice in the context of manipulative and opportunistic politics. In fact, politicians are very much hesitant to say 'we will bring 'Rajaji's rule' as in the case of 'Kamaraj rule' or 'Anna rule.' Though Rajaji himself changed his political stand and even opposed the enforcement of Hindi, his anti-Congress views were not adequately highlighted as the crescendo of Dravidian leaders dominated the political scene of Tamil Nadu. The case of Periyar provides sufficient space for variety of politicians and political groups to manipulate and distort the original message of rationalistic foundations. In fact, Rajaji stands alone with his principles without any authorization from any groups of politicians. His legacy is not certified with successive generations of public sphere. Periyar stands with branches and offshoots. His legacy is survived by variety of groups as it provides ample scope for power and political advantage for Dravidian leaders. In spite of all these discontinuities and distortions, the legacies survive as an idea in large measures and their impacts on the politics and governance of Tamil Nadu in one way or other continue.

In one way or other, Periyar's Dravidian Movement can be considered as one of the legacies of the unpopular policies of Rajaji. In other words, in the absence of Hindi enforcement, new scheme for primary education, Sanskritization of Tamil tradition, and feudal-capitalistic way of policy formulation - which remain the hallmark of Rajaji - Periyar's Dravidian Movement could not have enough space for revolutionary and radical activities. Coming to the legacy of Periyar, most of the non-Brahmins did not take any serious view on the basic slogans, such as, 'God does not exist' or 'the Dravidian race does not have castes.' On the other side, Rajaji's opposition to Congress party and his later day's anti-Hindi stand in support of Tamil are less recognized by the Dravidian leaders.

Rereading of Political History

Rereading of political history of Tamil Nadu is not an easy exercise. One has to stride among constructed biographies, hagiographies, historiography of official version or vested groups. It is to be impartially evaluated that how far the significance of the rational stand of Periyar is realized or recognized by Tamil society. Construction of casteless society, political power for the common good, issue based politics and reforms rather than personality clashes, intertwining practice with ideology are the major areas to be reread. The old elites and the emerging elites are always in the lead to appropriate not only the ideas but also the scarce resources. The critical question in assessing the legacy of great leaders is who is empowered. This question ultimately gives place to bring out a new line of struggle. Moreover, selective appropriation of Periyar's ideas is in vogue among the Dravidian leaders and followers.

Constructed biographies and hagiographies are available for many political leaders. Surprisingly, they are not available for both Rajaji

and Periyar. This is because, both were blunt and open and not ready for any compromise or cajole. They did not show any interest in sycophancy. They did not accept any followers for name sake or for personal advantage. Their pragmatic approach and open talk without any sophistry earned many enemies in politics.

Their life is a part of their respective traditions and perceptions. One can make a detailed list of similarities and differences. Such kind of endevour would not alter the process of politics. Because, the dominant discourse of Tamil Nadu is already crystallized. We have political parties, political leaders, communal and caste organizations, and above all we have the Constitutions with Amendments. They assure a secure life or sometimes provide an insecure life depending upon the political orientations of civil society.

Conclusion

If corporate capitalism or liberalization fails in India, the problem is linked with global scenario. Rajaji's accountability assumes moral sentiment only. When an excess political bureaucratic structure eats away the functional efficiency of government, Rajaji's vision is remembered with honour. When religion and rituals flourish, or Dravidian parties are after power, or Brahmins lead Dravidian organizations, the very tradition and legacy of Periyar is under question. It shows that Periyar is assigned more accountability. The question of relevance is to whom it might bring political advantage. Periyar provides more space to harness political advantage which is group-based. Rajaji is not up to the group but to the individual who succumbs to spirituality rather than political reality.

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